



MEDIA ARTS

Spotlight

April 30, 2026



I feel like, as we walked in, we saw the slideshow of all of you working behind the scenes, all working together. It's been such a great group effort, and I almost feel like that comes across on the screen. Even though every story is different and every style is different, that cohesion is evident.

- Professor Frances Perkins

HexaDoc Pulls Off Six-Sided Smashereroo at 'First-Year' Screening

Immediate Buzz for UNT's Newest MFA Documentary Filmmakers



The Night's Line Up:

El Vidente by Krissiha Lagos

No Sabo by Lizeth Grimaldo

The Missing Piece by Sara Rosas

Center Point by Rusty Baker

Becoming Taylor by Rahim Handy

While Others Fly by Cole Park



Professor Tania Khalaf addresses the audience prior to the screening in the Media Arts Building's Theater Room.

The next generation of documentary filmmakers made a powerful statement at the University of North Texas on April 30, as six first-year MFA Documentary Production and Studies graduates premiered a bold slate of nonfiction films to a packed audience inside the Media Arts Building.

Known collectively as the "HexaDoc" cohort, the emerging filmmakers showcased an ambitious and emotionally resonant body of work that many attendees described as one of the strongest first-year documentary screenings in recent program history. The evening drew fellow students, faculty, family, and friends for a celebration of cinematic storytelling that blended visual innovation with deeply human narratives.

Fresh off completing documentary production courses under Professor Tania Khalaf and cinematography instruction led by Professor Brandon Gaesser, the cohort delivered films exploring cultural identity, faith, mentorship, resilience, science and technology, mental health, immigration, and urgent current events. Faculty members praised the screening for its cinematic polish, emotional depth, and cohesive collaborative spirit. Following the screening,

Professor Frances Perkins called the group "one of the strongest cohorts to ever walk in here," applauding the filmmakers' bold storytelling choices, diverse styles, and commitment to collaboration.

EL VIDENTE by KRISSIHA LAGOS

Right out of the gate, the culturally immersive *El Vidente*, directed by Krissiha Lagos, set the tone for the evening's caliber of content. The film follows Catholic seer Don Diego, who believes he was blessed with a divine second sight that allows him to help others through rituals rooted in faith, indigenous traditions, and what he calls "white magic."

Through observational storytelling and firsthand testimony from longtime clients, the documentary offers an intimate glimpse into Don Diego's daily practices and the lives impacted by his spiritual guidance. Rather than sensationalizing the subject matter, the film seeks to humanize a misunderstood spiritual practice while examining the emotional and cultural connections that sustain it within the community.

Lagos said her filmmaking centers on amplifying overlooked voices and experiences. "My films aim to make niche and underrepresented stories accessible to wider audiences," Lagos said.

Faculty members and members of her cohort described Lagos' work as among the strongest visually in the cohort, citing her confidence, strong decision-making, and intentional cinematic approach. Professors also praised her ability to fully commit to both her subject matter and audience, allowing the film's emotional and visual language to feel purposeful from beginning to end.



Behind the Scenes: Lagos adjusts the wireless lavalier on her subject, Don Diego, prior to the production of *El Vidente*.



Behind the Scenes: Lagos and Rosas take turns getting comfortable with a shoulder-mounted cinema camera configuration during Cinematography graduate class in UNT's Media Arts Building.

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NO SABO by LIZETH GRIMALDO



Behind the Scenes: Grimaldo dials in the perfect color temperature on studio lights during a lighting exercise in Cinematography class

Cultural identity and intergenerational experience also took center stage in *No Sabo* by Lizeth Grimaldo. The documentary follows 50-year-old Pablo Vera, a Latino man who never learned to speak Spanish fluently after his family prioritized English during his upbringing. The film documents Pablo's emotional journey to reconnect with his heritage while confronting the feelings of isolation and cultural disconnection experienced by many second-generation Americans often labeled as "No Sabo kids."

Blending deeply personal conversations with broader cultural reflection, the film examines themes of language, identity, and generational legacy as Pablo reconnects with family members and uncovers surprising truths about his upbringing. Through intimate interviews, including conversations with his sister Lynette and revelations from his mother, the documentary explores what it means to reclaim culture later in life.

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Grimaldo said the film was inspired by the underrepresented experiences faced by many Latino families in the United States.

"I knew coming into this program that I wanted to do documentaries about Latino struggles and stuff that we face that aren't really represented," Grimaldo said. "This story is not only a passage for other second-generation Latinos, but any second-generation person who lost or never learned their culture's language."

Grimaldo's adaptability and ability to pivot creatively throughout her first-year production is evident. Her use of bilingual storytelling and Spanish-language elements added another layer of authenticity and emotional depth to the project, while her confidence and ability to connect with participants helped strengthen the film's intimate tone.



Behind the Scenes: Pablo and his sister, Linette, discuss his desire to reclaim his culture in *No Sabo*.



Rosas' style of visual storytelling is both a personal journey and art form in *The Missing Piece*, primarily shot on the UNT campus.

THE MISSING PIECE by **SARA ROSAS**

Another emotionally charged entry, *The Missing Piece* by Sara Rosas, chronicled Rosas' own journey rebuilding her life after leaving religious vocation amid struggles with anxiety and depression. Through vulnerable first-person storytelling, the film explored faith, renewal, and the search for wholeness.

The documentary stood out for the unique challenge Rosas undertook as both filmmaker and participant, repeatedly reconstructing and filming her own deeply personal story while balancing the technical and emotional demands of production.



Behind the Scenes:
Sara Rosas frames the subject for an interview in her Cinematography graduate class.

Through reflective narration, puzzle-piece symbolism, and a dual interview structure, the film created a layered portrait of resilience and self-discovery.

Rosas said the project emerged from "a deeply personal place," adding that stepping in front of the camera allowed her to create connection through vulnerability and honesty. Professors also pointed to her strengths in producing and resiliency, describing her filmmaking approach as thoughtful, patient, and deeply intentional.



The former Ms. Sara Carlson came to the University of North Texas to pursue a MFA in Documentary Production, but found, Gerardo Rosas, the literal missing piece in her life.

CENTER POINT by RUSTY BAKER



Volunteer firefighters zip up the Guadalupe River during the department's swift-water rescue training shown in the film

The screening also featured *Center Point* by Rusty Baker. The gripping documentary revisits the catastrophic July 4, 2025, Guadalupe River flood that devastated the Texas Hill Country, focusing on the heroic actions of the Center Point Volunteer Fire Department during the disaster.

Through intimate access to volunteer firefighters including Fire Chief Charles Holt, Assistant Chief Larry Littrell, and firefighter Travis Cranford, the film highlights swift-water rescues, emergency evacuations, and the ongoing realities of volunteer emergency response. Rather than relying on reenactments or stylized embellishment, the documentary grounds itself in firsthand testimony and the lived experiences of the people directly impacted by the tragedy.

Baker said he was driven to tell a story often overshadowed by controversy and blame-focused headlines surrounding the disaster. "What I discovered was not a story of failure, but of quiet competence, courage, and compassion under pressure," Baker said. "These individuals saved lives and held a fractured community together."

Faculty members described Baker's filmmaking approach as "epic," citing his willingness to tackle large-scale, emotionally significant stories that resonate with broad audiences. Professors praised his research, writing, and leadership skills, noting his



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ability to deeply understand his subjects while advocating for stories that might otherwise go overlooked.

Also of note is Baker's collaboration within his 'HaxaDoc' cohort and his commitment to pushing both himself and fellow filmmakers toward stronger storytelling and higher production standards.

Baker, a UNT alumnus and Radio/Television/Film graduate of 1999, has not made a cinematic film since *Faded Glory: The Von Erich Story*, that same year. The feature-length documentary chronicling the 80's wrestling family of the same name was a local hit for North Texas fans. Shortly after a successful film festival run, Baker returned to the Marine Corps to support the Global War on Terror the day after the fateful September 11, 2001, attacks.

Baker answered the nation's call by returning to the Marine Corps Reserve after a four-year break to attend college. Trained as a military photojournalist, he spent the next decade as a combat photographer, documenting Marines in every clime and place—from Afghanistan's first elections in 2004 to air-to-air fighter training in Alaska. Even after promotions moved him beyond the public affairs field, Baker continued carrying a camera on every combat deployment. His work sought to reveal the human side of military operations, including the troop surge in Afghanistan in 2010, capturing not only the mission, but the Marines who lived it.



Behind the Scenes: Baker captures footage of a 'Sherp' amphibious rescue vehicle emerging from the Guadalupe River during swift-water rescue training.

BECOMING TAYLOR by RAHIM HANDY

Among the most emotionally resonant films of the evening was *Becoming Taylor* by Rahim Handy in collaboration with Clear Motion Films. The intimate, character-driven documentary follows Taylor, a teenage girl separated from her mother at the age of two due to a 22-year crack addiction, as she uses boxing, mentorship, and community support to reclaim her identity and redefine her future.

Rather than framing the story around athletics, Handy approached the film as an exploration of survival, healing, and transformation. Through the mentorship program Families of Conviction and its "SuperSeed" initiative, Taylor learns to process trauma through discipline, emotional regulation, and structure. In the film, boxing becomes more than physical training—it becomes a language for growth, self-expression, and control.

"When I began documenting Taylor's story, I knew I was not making a film about boxing," Handy said. "I was making a film about survival, identity, and transformation."



Behind the Scenes: Handy pulls focus on his zoom lens during a production with Stand Together Foundation.

Awards & Recognition

- Gold Telly Award — Social Worker Fighting for Change
Role: Cinematographer / Producer
- Silver Telly Award — Thursday Night Football Intro
Role: Cinematographer / Production
- Multiple ADDY Awards — Science is Real Campaign with Dallas Sierra Club and UTA Team
Role: Production Team Member
- REMI Award — Science is Real Campaign
Role: Production Team Member



Handy said he intentionally introduced audiences early to the reality of Taylor's mother's addiction, not to sensationalize trauma, but to provide emotional context for the audience to understand the significance of Taylor's everyday decisions.

"By understanding the weight of that history, the audience can see Taylor's everyday actions for what they truly are," Handy explained. "Acts of growth. Acts of control. Acts of healing."

At the heart of the film is the idea of reclaiming identity and challenging the labels imposed by circumstance. Handy said the documentary explores "the space between who you were shaped to be and who you choose to become," ultimately portraying Taylor not as a statistic, but as a young woman actively rewriting her future.

Audience members and faculty praised the film for its emotional intelligence, polished cinematography, and compelling narrative structure. Handy's approach to storytelling reflected both technical precision and strong interpersonal connection with his subjects, qualities that classmates and professors say have become defining traits of his filmmaking style.

"One of my biggest strengths is execution," Handy said. "I naturally understand how to connect with people and tell stories that resonate with the audience they are meant for."

That confidence translated into a visually ambitious production that leaned heavily into cinematic framing, movement, and emotional pacing. Faculty members noted Handy's strong cinematography and production instincts, emphasizing his ability to pair professional-level visuals with deeply human storytelling.



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Behind the Scenes: Park showed dedication to his project when he raced to Cape Canaveral to document the Artemis 2 launch on April 1. Focused on capturing the moment with two separate cinema cameras, he nearly forgot to take a selfie proving he was there. In this photo, he points toward the rocket's contrail streaking across the sky.

WHILE OTHERS FLY by COLE PARK

Adding a compelling science and technology perspective to the evening was *While Others Fly* directed by Cole Park. Filmed in Houston and Titusville, Fla., the documentary explores the history of America's spaceflight program through the life and career of NASA engineer Roseanne Drake and her spouse, John Moore.

Through personal archives, NASA imagery, and firsthand reflections, the nostalgic 4:3 aspect ratio film examines the evolution of the shuttle program, the Challenger disaster, and the modern Artemis missions, culminating in the emotional launch of Artemis 2 and NASA's return to lunar exploration.

Park described the film as an exploration of the human stories often hidden behind historic milestones. "There are so many legendary stories around the world taking place each day that may never be brought to mainstream attention," Park said.

Park's detailed approach to filmmaking and his strong emphasis on technical execution drew praise from his peers. His cinematography, color work, and post-production stood out throughout the screening, while his willingness to travel to Florida to capture the Artemis launch demonstrated a deep commitment to obtaining the material necessary to fully realize the story.

Professors also noted Park's ability to move beyond technical precision and incorporate stronger emotional depth into the film, elevating it beyond a historical overview into a personal reflection on human achievement and exploration.



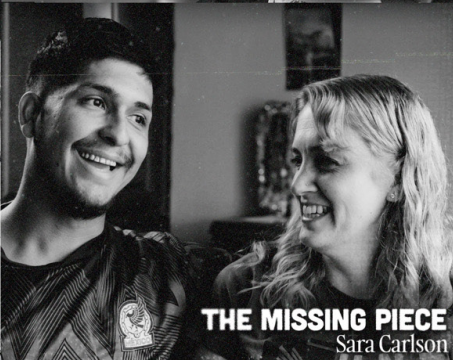
There are so many legendary stories around the world taking place each day that may never be brought to mainstream attention



Behind the Scenes: Amid fetching B-Roll at Johnson Space Center's rocket graveyard, Park snaps a selfie with NASA engineer Roseanne Drake and husband John Moore.

UNT MEDIA ARTS PRESENTS

1st Year Screening
6:00PM RITP 184
Apr 30 2026



HEXADOC

Audience members praised the evening for its cinematic ambition and emotional authenticity, with many noting the unusual maturity and range demonstrated by a first-year cohort. The screening further heightened anticipation for the filmmakers' second-year productions, which faculty members say already show significant promise in development.

With compelling storytelling, striking cinematography, and a strong collaborative identity, HexaDoc's inaugural screening positioned the cohort as a rising creative force within the next wave of documentary cinema.

